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THE NEW FRESCOS

IN THE

BENEDICTINE ABBEY AT MONTE CASSINO.

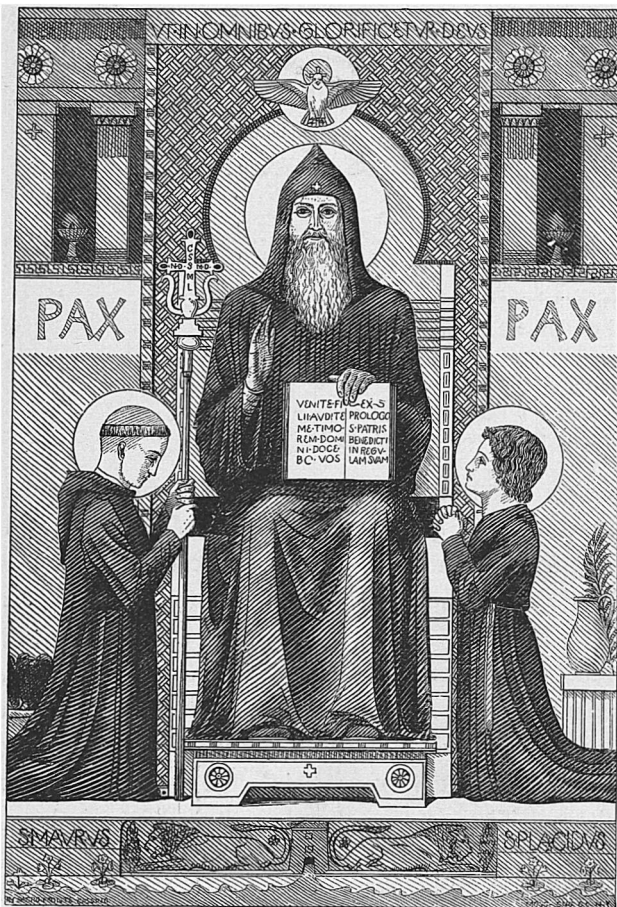


Fig. 1.—ST. BENEDICT.

IN no department of activity does the central principle of the life of a people or an age display itself so readily or so unmistakably as in its art. In the many forms through which, in recent times, painting has been tending to dispense with originality, and sink down into a skilful reproduction of reality, it is easy to see the great defect of our day, the want of an actual, life-shaping belief in the ideal. Painters, for the most part, are so absorbed in the *how* to express, that they have lost all interest in the *what*. Hardly one strives to penetrate beneath the surface, to draw forth and embody the actuality, the eternal purpose of nature, or to find a form adequate to such embodiment. It may be argued that the mere technical preparation which so completely engages the attention of the artists of our day is a most necessary one for the expression of a new and glorious ideal, whose reality has not yet entirely revealed itself to us. But it was to be expected that this tendency of art to forget its true functions should at last bring about a reaction. Men, especially if certain of their faculties have been abnormally developed, may for a time content themselves

with the real, and find delight in it; but it is only for a time. Sooner or later, their supersensual nature asserts itself, and demands ideality, i. e. actuality or spiritual freedom. Perhaps nowhere has the reaction against the current realism in painting shown itself so plainly, or with such splendid results, as in the frescos with which the recently repaired cells of St. Benedict, at Monte Cassino, are now being decorated, and some of which are here represented in illustrations made from the heliotypes from the original cartoons, published for sale by the monks of Monte Cassino. Of course, neither the heliotypes nor the engravings from them can give any notion of the splendor which color adds to these works; still they will help the reader to understand better what I have to say about them. The thoughts which they express have nothing in common with that ideal of the future before alluded to. But as the older ideal which they embody has not yet become obsolete for a large part of humanity, they deserve careful consideration

by all. Before, however, we proceed to such a consideration, it will be necessary to say a few words by way of introduction.

Monte Cassino, the oldest, largest, and most celebrated monastery in Europe, stands on the summit of a high and steep hill in Campania, overlooking the splendid valley of the Garigliano. It occupies the site of an ancient Pelasgic or Etruscan town, probably named Casinum, of whose Kyklopean walls extensive and imposing remains are still to be seen. When, in later times, a new town was built at the foot of the hill, the old town became its citadel, and was occupied by a sacred grove and temples to Apollo (called here, apparently, Deluentius), Venus, and Jupiter. These divinities were still honored with worship in A.D. 529, when St. Benedict, now forty-nine years old, having been driven from Subiaco by the malignity of his neighbors and the demoralization of his ill-disciplined monks, came here, divinely guided,¹ and accompanied by three ravens and his two earliest disciples, St. Placidus and St. Maur, to take possession of a tract of land which had been presented to him by the patrician Tertullus, the father of Placidus. It seems impossible that Christianity should not have been preached at Casinum before that time; but, possibly owing to the utter confusion, anarchy, and darkness caused by the inroads of the barbarians, the population, finding no help in the Christian God, had fallen back upon their old and never quite forgotten divinities. At all events, according to the tradition, idolatry there was. Dante (*Paradiso*, XXII.) makes St. Benedict say:—

“That mountain on whose slope Cassino stands
Was frequented of old upon its summit
By a deluded folk and ill-disposed;
And I am he who first up thither bore
The name of Him who brought upon the earth
The truth that so much sublimateth us.
And such abundant grace upon me shone
That all the neighboring towns I drew away
From the impious worship that seduced the world.”²

The saint, on his arrival, began at once to preach the Gospel to the natives, and so great was his success that he was soon allowed to hew down the grove on the top of the hill, and to turn the temple of Apollo into an oratory sacred to St. Martin. On the highest point of the hill, where a great hypæthral altar to Apollo had stood, he built an oratory to St. John the Baptist. This done, the saint proceeded to establish himself and his disciples in the old citadel, of which, no doubt, the entire walls were then standing. It contained, amongst other buildings, which he appropriated to various uses, an ancient tower of Roman construction, in which he took up his own abode. This consisted of an upper and a lower chamber, communicating by means of a stair. He seems to have lived chiefly in the former, using the latter partly as a storehouse and partly as a chamber for his visitors. The upper chamber had two windows, one looking southward toward Capua, the other westward toward Piumarola, where the saint's sister, Saint Scolastica, having followed her brother from Subiaco, founded a convent for women.

Round this ancient tower the monastery of St. Benedict gradually rose. It appears to have been of no great size, and to have consisted of a common dormitory, a refectory, a kitchen, a cellar, and a hospice, all on the level of the lower story of St. Benedict's tower. As soon as the saint had thus secured an abode for his followers, his next care was to provide for them a rule, by the strict observance of which they might avoid falling into those disorders which had driven him from Subiaco. This famous rule, the *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, is supposed to have been written in the lower chamber of the tower. It would not be too much to say, that, with the exception of the New Testament, this is the most famous of Christian documents. To it

¹ In giving an account of these frescos I have tried to put myself in the position of the persons by whom and for whom they were painted. I am not sufficiently acquainted with the possibilities of God's nature to decide positively whether he can or cannot perform miracles; but, in either case, it is better to study art products sympathetically from within, than condescendingly from without.

² Longfellow's translation.

are due, in very large measure, the eminent success and usefulness of Western monasticism. The motto of Oriental monasticism may be said to have been, and, for that matter, still to be, *Ora et contemplare*, which is readily translated into "Mumble prayers and cross your hands," and this, indeed, is about

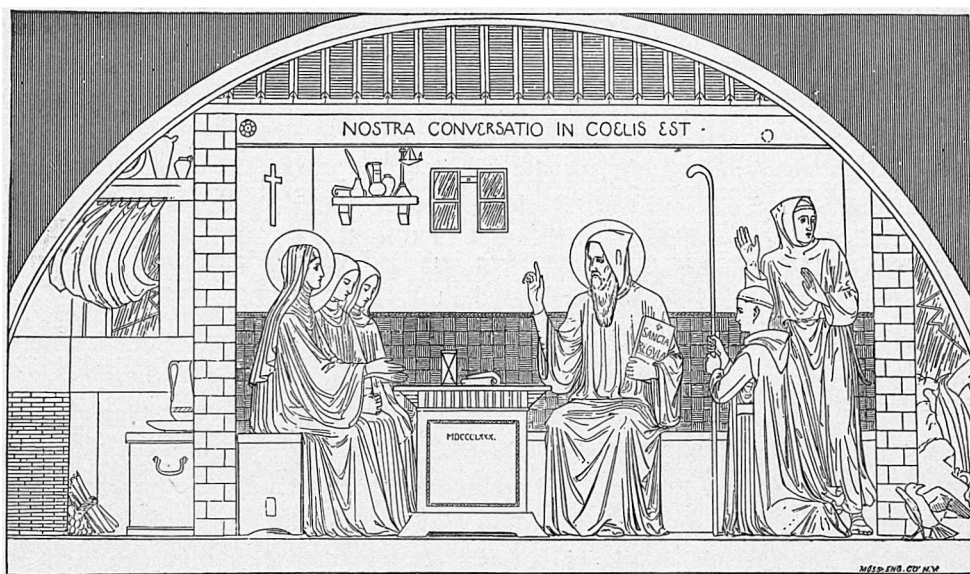


Fig. 2.—THE LAST CONVERSATION OF ST. BENEDICT AND ST. SCOLASTICA.

all that the dirty, ignorant, undisciplined monks of the Greek Church ever do. St. Benedict had evidently seen enough of such monasticism, even in the West, to convince him that it was of no benefit either to the monks themselves or to the world. Assured that not even prayer could free men from that first curse of labor, "which hath a blessing in't," he chose for the motto of his rule, *Ora et labora*,—"Pray and labor"; pray with speech and with song, labor with hand and with head. And this is what the sons of St. Benedict, numbered by thousands and tens of thousands, have been doing for well-nigh fourteen hundred years. But this is not the place to rehearse what they have done for agriculture and the useful arts, or for literature, science, music, and the fine arts. St. Benedict continued to govern the monastery and the order founded by him for about sixteen years. During this time he was unwearied in his efforts for the good of his flock, and, like all the great saints of those days, performed many miracles and saw many visions. He lived to see his order established in Sicily and France by his two first faithful disciples, St. Placidus and St. Maur. His sister, as has been already said, had founded a convent for nuns at Piumarola, in the plain below Monte Cassino, and the two were in the habit of meeting, once a year, at a spot half-way between their respective abodes, in order to converse upon heavenly things. On the last occasion they ever saw each other, St. Scolastica, feeling that her end was near, and wishing to detain her unwilling brother for the night, for the sake of spiritual conversation, asked God to grant her that favor, whereupon there came on such a tempest of rain, thunder, and lightning, that St. Benedict felt he had a sufficient excuse for a breach of his own rule. On the following day, St. Scolastica died, and from the Piumarola-ward window of his tower, St. Benedict saw her soul, in the form of a dove, ascend into heaven. Her body was removed to Monte Cassino, and interred beneath the altar of the Oratory of St. John the Baptist, in a rock tomb, which St. Benedict had prepared for himself, and to which he followed her a few months afterwards, in March, 543. There their ashes still rest.

The monastery built by St. Benedict was destroyed, as he had prophesied, by the Lombards, in 589, and was not rebuilt until 718, the monks living meanwhile for the most part in Rome, in a house near the church of St. John in Lateran. The second monastery built by St. Petronax (Abbot, 718-751), was destroyed by the Saracens in 889. This time the monks retired to Teano (where the original of St. Benedict's Rule perished, among many other valuable things, in a conflagration), and afterwards to Capua. It was not till the year 949 that the monastery was again fit for occupation. The third edifice was destined to a long

and glorious existence, becoming one of the first seats of learning in the world, and harboring within its walls such men as St. Thomas Aquinas, Boccaccio, etc. It was destroyed by an earthquake in the year 1350, after having been robbed and pillaged by Louis, king of Hungary, and a condottiero, Giacomo Papone di Pignatoro. This was the last time the monastery was entirely destroyed. It underwent many vicissitudes, indeed, afterwards, and even as late as 1799 was pillaged, in the most brutal way, by the French revolutionary soldiers; but the building has for the most part been spared. Begun in 1362, it has been gradually approaching its present enormous dimensions for more than five hundred years. The present splendid church, a perfect jewel, was begun in 1648, and dedicated in 1727.

Some years ago, an American Benedictine, Abbot Wimmer of St. Vincent's, Penn., suggested the idea of celebrating with due pomp the fourteen-hundredth anniversary of St. Benedict's birth. This idea, having been favorably received by the Abbot of Monte Cassino (the Prior is an American), was communicated to the Benedictines all over the world. At a meeting of German abbots, held at Salzburg, on the occasion of the election of Father Eder as head of the monastery there, the Abbot of St. Martin's in Hungary agreed to interest the abbots of Europe and America in the matter, and Abbot Walter of Beuron in Prussia undertook to supply artists to decorate the cells of St. Benedict at Monte Cassino, which, it was understood, were being excavated and repaired under the auspices of the abbot of that place. Indeed, as early as 1873, the monks of Monte Cassino, encouraged by Cardinal Bartolini,¹ had begun to examine the remains of St. Benedict's monastery, with a view, chiefly, of discovering the original entrance. The excavations, however, were not begun until about the beginning of 1877. The discovery of the entrance awakened the desire to make further search, and thus one thing led to another, until it was at last decided to excavate, restore, and decorate all that remained of the sixth-century edifice. The work was a stupendous one, and demanded great outlay of time, labor, skill, research, and money. A number of workmen, varying from a hundred to a hundred and forty, were occupied for over three years in the manual labor of excavating and restoring. The research necessary for identifying the various remains discovered was supplied chiefly by Joseph Quandel, a learned monk of Monte Cassino; the skill, by the monks from Beuron; and the money, for the most part, by the various monasteries of the order. The result was, that, with the help of architectural remains and carefully sifted documentary evidence, it was found possible to restore in large part to its original condition the monastery of St. Benedict, and to decorate it in a manner worthy of its historical and religious importance. In order to preserve from further injury the ancient vaulted gateway running under St. Benedict's tower, a new and splendid entrance into the monastery was last year opened, to the east of the tower, between the *foresteria* and the archives.

The accompanying ground plans will show the shape and disposition of the rooms now in process of decoration. A represents the lower, B the upper story:—

1. Door leading from great court of present monastery. 2. Vestibule to both stories.
3. Descent to great stair leading to lower story. 4. Large room, divided into two parts by an arch. 5. Small antechamber. 6. Choir of the monks. 7, 8. St. Benedict's cell, now divided into two by a wall; the part marked 7 considerably heightened. 9–11. Sacristy and other offices. 12. Great stair leading to lower story. 13. Great arched entrance to the same.
14. Room now called Hall of the Monastic Virtues, with arched window giving a view of lower cell, 18. 15. Small room with altar, near the entrance to the original monastery.
16. Part of ancient dormitory, the rest of which is now occupied by the Chapel of the Mater Dolorosa. 17. Hall of the Saints of Monte Cassino. 18. Lower cell of St. Benedict, over the ancient entrance.

Six of these chambers contain altars, which, with one in a niche to the right of the tower

¹ This eminent personage has written a work on the recent excavations, entitled, *L'Antico Cassino e il primitivo Monastero di S. Benedetto restituito alla Luce dai suoi Ruderì*. Monte Cassino, 1880. Large 4to. 64 pp. 9 plates in color.

entrance, were consecrated at the recent great festival, May 15-19, 1880. The apartments to be decorated number fifteen.

The charge of restoring and decorating these chambers (*Stanze*) was placed in the hands of the German Benedictine monks from Beuron, who form a sort of school of religious art, under the direction of Father Lenz, who joined the order only about three years ago. The following are the names of the chief artists:— Desiderius Lenz, architect and sculptor; Gabriel Wüger, painter; Lucas Steiner, painter; Leander Haller, architect and painter; Joseph Leibinger, sculptor. The last, a pupil of Lenz, is not a monk. These five were assisted by four lay brothers, so that the total number of artists was nine. The first four, previous to entering upon the monastic life, had taken a full course in art at the Munich Academy, and afterwards studied ancient and early Christian art for many years in Berlin,

Nürnberg, Florence, and Rome, so that it was not out of dilettanteism, but with full consciousness of the methods and aims of art, past and present, that they abandoned the current realism and betook themselves to ideal art, which is, at bottom, always religious. They, moreover, showed the earnestness of their convictions, and their sense of the close relationship of art to religion, by abandoning the world, with its transient realities, and devoting themselves to ideality and God.

The subject which most naturally suggested itself for the decoration of the newly recovered chambers was the life of Benedict the Saint. Not the entire, merely human, life of the man, with its thousandfold inharmonious, inartistic details, but the epic part of it, that which, guided by a single great, conscious, ideal purpose, had a beginning, an episodic development full of struggles and victories, and an end all victory,—victory in which the human and temporal was triumphed over by the divine and the eternal. The purpose of the artists being, therefore, an ideal one, they used the external life and form of the saint only as a convenient means of expressing his inner life and character. They, accordingly, put away all that was merely natural and temporal in him, and tried to show that of which nature and time are but the garment. The real does not express the ideal: the transient is but the ephemeral fashion of the eternal. Not copies from nature, therefore, but forms stolen in hours of inspiration from the divine, are what we have a right to demand from the artist.

The plan of decoration was for the most part worked out, and the cartoons drawn, by Lenz, —Don Desiderio, as the monks call him,—a large, handsome man, about forty-five years of age, with broad, generous forehead, full, clear, mirthful, candid eyes, masculine features, and a splendid beard, falling down over his breast like a patriarch's. In doing so, he seems to have kept five objects steadily before him:—

1. To adhere strictly to the ideal and religious. 2. To use all the most suitable means for the expression of it, in whatever art—Egyptian, Assyrian, Etruscan, Greek, Byzantine, or Christian—they might be found. Each contributed something we cannot afford to lose. 3. To transform with the spirit of Christianity whatever he borrowed, and so bring perfect harmony into the whole. The result is an inexpressible devotional unity. 4. To exhibit or indicate in

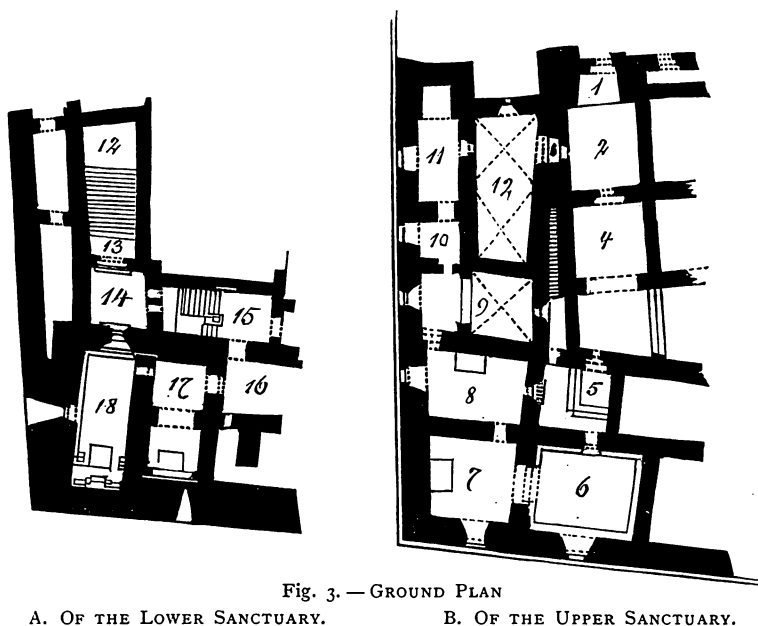


Fig. 3. — GROUND PLAN

A. OF THE LOWER SANCTUARY.

B. OF THE UPPER SANCTUARY.

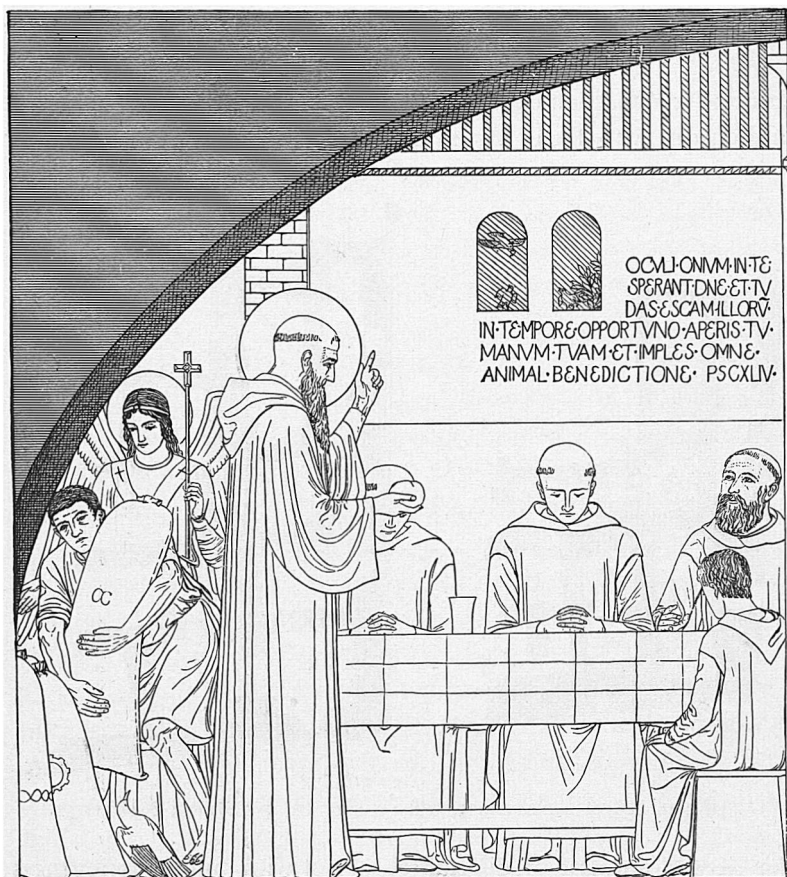


Fig. 4. — THE MIRACLE OF THE FLOUR.

upon the side-posts, — "Venite, exultemus Domino!" — and, putting away all earthly interests, enter with devotional spirit to behold with unsealed eyes a vision of the eternal.

This done, we find ourselves in the room marked 2, which may be regarded as a vestibule or introduction to the whole. On the wall to the left are figures of the various Old Testament patriarchs, whose single characteristic virtues were combined in St. Benedict:— Abraham representing faith and obedience; Isaac, sacrifice; Jacob, wisdom; Moses, the gift of legislation; Elijah, contemplation; and Elisha, the gift of miracles. On the sides of the door by which we entered are figures of St. Antony and St. Basil, the great fathers of Oriental monasticism. On the right-hand wall, on the side of the door marked 3, are represented Gregory the Great, writing the Life of St. Benedict,² and Peter the Deacon. On the other side are the four abbot saints, from whose lips St. Gregory drew his information, Simplicius, Constantine, Valentinianus, and Honoratus. On the sides of the door in the fourth wall are two angels. This door itself deserves careful study. The granite side-posts and lintel are adorned with reliefs, which at a distance seem Egyptian, but upon nearer approach are seen to be most Christian. The figures—graceful angels kneeling amid palms, in the attitude of deep devotion, and almost lifted from the ground on their great outstretched, sphinx-like wings of prayer—are, unlike Egyptian figures, carved in low, perfectly flat relief, and polished, while the background is left rough. Nothing of the Egyptian has been retained but the awful sense of massiveness and eternity. A fitting doorway for the home of St. Benedict!

Passing through this, we find ourselves in the long vaulted, arch-divided room, marked 4, in which are depicted the various events in the life of St. Benedict, from the time he left Subiaco to the time when his monastery was fully established at Monte Cassino. On the two sides of

every scene represented the past that rendered it possible, and the future rendered necessary by it. This accounts for many symbolic details that typify pre-Christian stages of religious thought. These details are never left enigmatic, and always add to the beauty and solemnity of the whole. They are borrowed from many arts. 5. To combine perfect correctness and extreme beauty of drawing with splendor and simplicity of coloring.¹

Let us now, possessed of this preliminary information, pay a visit to the cells of St. Benedict. Before passing through the outer gateway (1, see plan),—which will soon be closed by bronze doors, nineteen feet high, adorned with reliefs, and surmounted by a relief representing the Virgin adored by St. Benedict and St. Scolastica,—let us read the motto

¹ Certain imperfections in drawing which are noticeable in the cartoons have been corrected in the frescos.

² It was from this work, still extant, that Don Desiderio drew his facts, and something of his inspiration, in regard to the life of St. Benedict.

the entrance we see St. Benedict leaving Subiaco, and arriving at Monte Cassino with his two faithful disciples, his ravens, and his angel guides. On the wall to the left are four pictures:—

1. St. Benedict, after his arrival at Monte Cassino, praying before the "Monte Venere" for the conversion of the heathen. (The stone on which he knelt and left the mark of his knees is still shown at the abbey.) 2. The destruction of the temple and the burning of the grove of Apollo. Devils are taking furious flight in all directions. 3. St. Benedict preaching the gospel to the people of Cassino. 4. St. Benedict showing St. Martin, whom he found bound by his foot with a chain in a cavern near Monte Cassino, that the Christian ascetic must be bound only by the chain of love.

On the wall facing the entrance we see St. Benedict directing the workmen who are building his monastery. In the crescent above, between two cypresses, is the tower of St. Benedict, with streams of blessing flowing from its foundation, (this tower and the streams appear on the arms of Monte Cassino,) and on either side St. Peter and St. Paul. On the right-hand wall are five pictures, representing the difficulties which St. Benedict had to encounter from evil spirits in the construction of his monastery:—

1. St. Benedict scaring the Devil away from a stone which his workmen had found immovable. 2. St. Benedict causing the false fire to disappear with which the Devil had frightened the monks, when, having found in their diggings a small image of Apollo, they threw it against the kitchen wall. The image went through the wall, and seemed to set the whole kitchen on fire. 3. A young monk crushed to pieces by the falling of a wall. 4. The same monk carried in a shroud to the cell of St. Benedict. 5. St. Benedict, by prayer, restoring the monk to life and soundness.

In the small room, marked 5, which we next enter, there are various simple decorations, and a dove flying between palms. The appropriateness of this symbolism need not be dwelt upon. The palms, if conventional, are exceedingly beautiful, and the dove has wings like those of Assyrian figures. Is not Noah's dove with the palm-branch typical? Over the door leading into the next room is the dedicatory inscription:—

"Dei et Salvatoris nostri Jesu Christi
Deiperæ Virginis Mariæ

Ac Divi Patris Benedicti
Nomini dedicatum."

THOMAS DAVIDSON.

(Conclusion in the next number.)



Fig. 5.—GROUP FROM "THE CULTIVATION OF THE ARTS."